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ABSTRACT

Awareness of audience is of major importance in rhetoric, but most students who come to a writing center need help in recognizing and accommodating an audience for their work. Standard warnings from rhetoric texts and writing instructors not to write for the instructor not withstanding, it is the job of the writing center staff to help the student acknowledge the professor (the professional, not the person) as audience. The center staff must also teach the students the conventions of academic discourse and help them to adjust their writing accordingly. Minimally, such discourse is formal, serious, properly documented, structured, of limited scope, substantiated, correct, guided by reason, and informative or interpretive. Writing center staff should also know the conventions of academic forms: the case study, the laboratory report, the review paper, and research papers in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Finally, a usage preference profile of faculty will enable the center staff to guide the students' writing realistically. (JL)

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Teaching Audience Analysis in the Writing Center

The centrality of the concept of audience to rhetoric is recognized both historically and currently. Unlike dialectic or logic, which judges an argument's viability vis-a-vis other arguments, rhetoric judges an argument's viability vis-a-vis the audience to whom it is directed. In Aristotle's words, "persuasive means persuasive to a person."[1] Aristotle's insistence that one must know one's audience takes a practical form; he devotes eighteen chapters of the Rhetoric, Book II to an analysis of character and emotion. Although few modern rhetorics devote any significant attention to audience, research in our discipline reflects growing awareness of its significance for writers. In a major study comparing the protocols of novice and expert writers, Flower and Hayes found that the "most striking difference" between the two is the tendency of the experts "to represent or create goals for dealing with audience."[2] Clearly, then, inexpert writers require help in recognizing and accomodating an audience fo their work. Because the vast majority of Writing Center clients are inexpert, the staff must be prepared to "teach" audience.

Working with clients on audience requires a practical, realistic approach to the problem particularly if a Writing Center is what Steward and Croft call an "open" one, serving "all students from all disciplines."[3] Students come to such centers to work on the standard writing assignments from introductory or upper-level courses, and they usually do not come draft in hand, seeking help with revision and editing. Instead they come empty-handed, assignment only in mind, seeking like Shakespeare's poet to give to airy nothing a local habitation and a name. They must write, and they must do so for reasons that are external and imposed -- they have been

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given an assignment to complete. Paradoxically the very artificiality of the writing exigency demands a realistic analysis of audience.

Realistically, who is the audience for the writing assignment a typical tutee brings? Occasionally an audience, real or hypothetical, will be specified in the assignment -- the editor of a local paper, the Board of Trustees, members of the DAR. Only students from the composition sequence, however, are likely to come with specified audiences, for in spite of the admirable emphasis on writing across the curriculum, most writing assignments are constructed in this time-honored fashion: "You will have a paper due on April 15; twelve typed pages, double-spaced." What's a tutor to do?

Many rhetoric texts -- and while most tutors have been weaned from them, they were nursed at their bosoms and tend to turn to them in times of trouble -- most rhetorics either assume that writers have an audience or tell them, without further help, to invent one. Other texts suggest that one write for the Universal Audience, an entity credited by such fine rhetoricians as Chaim Perelman and Ross Winterowd.[4] Unfortunately, for me the very term inevitably brings to mind the figure depicted on the Land O' Lakes butter carton. There she sits, a lovely Indian woman, smiling beatifically, eyes rolled heavenward, braided, beaded, be-feathered -- and unapproachable. I suspect the term Universal Audience conjures up similiar, equally unapproachable images in students.

Writing Center staff should have serious reservations about the wisdom of following the rhetorics' advice and directing students with typical academic assignments to invent or imagine an audience, universal or not. Such instructions oversimplify the complexity of audience by ignoring the truth that an audience is not simply a reader, real or imagined, or an idea

in the mind of the writer, but also that it is something created -- bodied forth -- by the discourse itself.[5] But my more fundamental problem with helping students invent an audience for an academic paper is that it is for all practical purposes an unnecessary activity. An audience already exists for any piece of academic discourse: it's the instructor. I realize that statement sounds heretical; I am convinced is is not.

Students automatically view the instructor as audience. The query "who are you writing this for (to)?" inevitably produces a professor's name in answer. Students' attempts to "psych out" their instructors come from their sense of the instructor-as-audience, a sense that is, as Louis Middleman is one of the few to acknowledge, quite sound.[6] Writing teachers and tutors are trained, conditioned to refute this truth and can point for support to warnings against viewing the instructor as audience in rhetoric after rhetoric. In continuing to deny the instructor's role as audience for academic discourse, we prove ourselves as gullible and timid as the townsfolk in "The Emperor's New Clothes." Like the child in the fairy tale, our students are right. The emperor is, in fact, buck naked. The instructor <u>is</u> the audience. We continue to deny this at the cost of our credibility with our students.

The instructor is undeniably the audience in the simplest sense of the term: he or she is a reader of the text. Our intentions in refusing to legitimize the professorial audience were admirable: we wanted to keep our students from focusing on the instructor reading their writing in order to free them to write, to insure sufficiently detailed explanations, to help prevent stylistic straining. These goals can be otherwise met, must be otherwise met because only when the instructor is the acknowledged audience for academic discourse will the writing fully succeed. Within the composition sequence it is indeed possible that the instructor who reads and

evaluates the paper "serves not as audience but as editor and judge of success."[7] Outside the composition sequence, however, professors act as audience, judging a writing assignment on how effectively it speaks to them in their roles as professors in a certain discipline. Writings which fail to confirm them in their roles, writings which cast them in different roles are judged lacking.

To realistically help its clients in writing audience-aware academic prose the Writing Center should provide two forms of service. First the tutor must help the student acknowledge the professor, i.e. the professional, not the person, as audience. One must explore with students the complexity of the term audience, enabling them to see that the word audience "essentially refers not to people as such but to those apparent aspects of knowledge and motivation in readers and listeners that form the contexts for discourse and the ends of discourse."[8] Students must understand that it is not as a liberal, a Methodist, a parent, a cellist, or a sloppy dresser that Dr. Whoever reads a paper, but as one of the community of economists, or botanists, or sociologists. A student who understands that a professor's role as audience involves only a small part of the total person may begin appropriately to shape the writing for the reader.

Writing Center staff must be prepared to help their clients explore the purpose, nature and conventions of academic discourse, both in general and in the various disciplines because these things establish and confirm roles. As a recent article on research papers illustrates, students' views of the aims and purposes academic writing do not necessarily conform to the instructors'.[9] Unless the student understand the expectations of his audience, i.e. unless he understands the conventions of academic discourse and adjusts his writing accordingly, his prose will not confirm the professor in her role and it will be judged lacking.

What are the conventions of academic discourse that Writing Center staff should recognize? Minimally, that it is guided by reason, formal, serious, properly documented, structured, of limited scope, substantiated, correct, and informative or interpretive. Within particular disciplines, conventions vary. A thoroughly prepared Writing Center staff should know (or know where to locate) the conventions governing the forms of writing their clients must compose. Again minimally: the case-study, the laboratory report, the review paper, and research papers in the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences. Elaine Maimon's Writing in the Arts and Sciences is an excellent resource and should be on every Writing Center's shelves.[10] The student, of course, is responsible for understanding the nature of the assignment; however because "much of the time it is not possible to separate a sense of audience from a sense of genre and convention,"[11] the Writing Center staff must be prepared to deal with convention in order to deal effectively with audience.

Second, because we recognize that "correct usage" often involves personal preference (e.g. whether a comma should follow the penultimate item in a series), Writing Center staff must be prepared to guide the student's editing process realistically by maintaining usage-preference profile of faculty. Among the items such a profile might cover are preferences regarding use of the first person pronoun, the second person pronoun, deliberate fragments, split infinitives, the passive voice, contractions, sentences beginning with and, but, or however, and the like. Compiling these profiles is a delicate matter and depends, of course, on the co-operation of faculty. Suffice it to say that a faculty member completing a usage-preference profile should not feel as if she is taking a quiz; the form should make clear that the instructor is being asked to choose between valid options. (There will naturally be at least one self-appointed Guardian of the Purity of the Language who will

hasten to inform the Center Director that only one option is correct, and that, as he has long suspected, Writing Center staff are playing fast and loose with the language.)

Ideally the data on these forms can be fed into the Center's microprocessor, or the forms themselves may be kept on file. In any case they should be readily available to tutor and client as the paper is being edited. By recognizing that correctness, like beauty, resides in some instances in the mind of the beholder and accomodating for it, we are once more realistically helping students work with the actual audience for their academic writing.

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Notes

[1]Aristotle, The Rhetoric of Aristotle, trans. by Lane Cooper (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1932), p. 11.

[2]Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, "The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem," College Composition and Communication, 31 (1980), 29.

[3]Joyce S. Steward and Mary K. Croft, The Writing Laboratory: Organization, Management, Methods (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1982), p. 9.

[4]Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation, trans. by John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), p. 31.

[5]Walter J. Ong, "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction," PMLA, 90 (1975), 9-21.

[6]Louis I. Middleman, "Psych-Out Q's and A's," ADE Bulletin, 63 (1980), 39.

[7]Douglas B. Park, "The Meanings of 'Audience,'" College English, 44 (1982), 255.

[8]Park, p. 249.

[9]Richard L. Larson, "The 'Research Paper' in the Writing Course: A Non-Form of Writing," College English 44 (1982), 811-816.

[10](Cambridge, MA.: Winthrop Publishers, 1981). This text does recognize the professor as audience.

[11]Park, p. 256.